

## YAKSHAGANA BAYALATA

K. S. Upadhyaya

Yakshagana Bayalata is an exquisite folk dance-drama played mostly in the South and North Kanara Districts of Mysore State. The genesis of this folk art is still a matter of controversy, but it can be stated that it has much affinity with the various regional forms of dance-drama performed in India such as the Kathakali of Kerala, the Bhagavatha Mela of Tamilnad, and Veedhinatakamu of Andhra Pradesh.

Yakshagana is known in different parts of Karnatak by different names. While in the plains of North Karnatak area it is termed *Doddaataa*, in old Mysore area it is known as *Moodalapaya*. Its more refined form prevalent in the coastal districts of Karnataka is popularly called *Yakshagana*. Akin to Yakshagana, there is another folk art very popular in South Kanara district namely *Yakshagana Bombeayaata* (Puppet Show). This has also a hoary tradition of over 300 years.

Expert opinion of various scholars on these various forms of popular dance-dramas trace their origin to the Sanskrit dance-drama which was in vogue in India during the 4th century A.D. Dr. Ananda Coomar-swamy, renowned critic and research scholar, has opined that ancient Shaivaites were practising a *Natya Shastra* which was in no way inferior to the *Natya Shastra* of Bharata and that the centre of this *Natya Shastra* was the famous Nataraja Temple of Chidambaram.

That these dance-dramas were distinctly different from the Sanskrit dramas was apparent. Sanskrit dramas were a combination of prose and poetry in *champu* style and the characters therein had to learn by rote the dialogue and there were no dance movements. But in Yakshagana it is

different. Yakshagana is essentially a dance-drama with the characters depicting their roles effectively through dance, keeping step with the accompanying music.

There is no historical and written evidence to trace the origin of the name *Yakshagana* given to this form of music. Scholars have felt that like *Gandharvagana* this form was named *Yakshagana*. *Gandharvagana* became *marg* music while *Yakshagana* became popular as *desi* music.

Those who specialised in this form of *desi Natya shastra* were known as *yakshas*. They became a community by themselves having taken up this art as a profession. It is rather difficult to prove whether the word *yaksha* was derived from Sanskrit or was the Sanskritised form of *desi*, *Jakka*. There is also a line of argument that *gandharvas* had learnt music from *yakshas* and that *Gandharvagana* or *marg* was the more refined form of *Yakshagana*. Further, Dr. Kota Shivarama Karanth, argues that *yakshini* is in Kannada, *Jakkini*. There is prevalent in the rural parts of Kanara, worship of a local deity named *Jakkini* and the worship of this *Jakkini* with music must have provided the background for the name of the music. There is also another line of thought that *Ekkalagana* in Kannada is solo music.

The Kannada poets, Nagachandra (12th century) and Rathnakara Varni (16th century), have described a form of dance-drama, *Ekkalagana* (*Ekkadigaru*). The reference obviously is to Yakshagana. Our ancestors used to call the exponents of the Yakshagana style of music, *yakkadigaru* the ancient Andhras called them *jakkulu*, and the stories sung by these musicians were known as *Jakkulu Katha*. Sarangadeva, an authority on music in Ancient India recognized *jakka* as a style of music popular in his time. The only other reference to the Yakshagana system of music in any of the Sanskrit works on dance and music is in the *Sangeetha Sudha* of Govinda Dikshitan. He referred to Yakshagana as one of the systems of music. This work, however, is comparatively of recent date, having been published only in 1628.

The 9th century Kannada poet-king Nripathunga, in his *Kavirajamargalankara* has referred to *desi* poetry and mentioned various forms of poetic compositions, *Chatthaana*, *Bedande*, *Baajana*. Scholars have interpreted these forms as different themes of Yakshagana. But there are no written works to prove this theory.

A Telugu work on prosody called *Appakaviyam* mentions that Yakshagana songs are composed in the *ragada* metre. Sarangadeva (13th century A.D.) in his *Sangeetha Rathnakara* describes a metre called *rahadi* and says that it is ideal for *veera rasa*, or war-like emotions. There is no doubt that this *rahadi* is the Kannada *ragale*. While originally this must

have been used predominantly in the composition of Yakshagana songs, now other metrical compositions like *bhamini*, *vaardhakya*, *kanda*, *vritta*, *dwipadi* and *shatpadi* are principally used.

It is quite clear from the writings of the great Kannada poet, Rathnakara Varni (circa 1557 A.D.) who hails from this region that there was in his time a system of dramatic entertainment consisting of music and dance with a hoary tradition of its own. The *bayalaata* tradition must have had at least a hundred years' fruitful development before then and the date of its attaining its own distinctive character and the stature of a great form of art must, therefore, be pushed back to about 1450 A.D. Dr. Shivaram Karanth cites many authorities to prove that the "Yakshagana" system of music was in vogue earlier still and declares that it has at least a thousand years history behind it. Yakshagana has flourished in the Kanara districts for centuries. One can see its powerful influence still surviving in the rites and rituals and matins and vespers of ancient temples and in the hymnal chorus at old fashioned weddings.

A matching system of dance also grew up, indigenous in origin, native to the soil, representative of the cultural greatness of *Malenaad* or *Nagarakhanda* as this part of India stretching from Udupi to Gokarna used to be known in those days, owing nothing to Bharata Natyam or Kathakali and drawing its inspiration entirely from the ritualistic dances offered in worship of the snake-god, Naga, propitiated from pre-historic times by the earliest inhabitants of the area. Those who have had the privilege of watching a *Naagamandala*, one of the most remarkable of such propitiatory dances, will be able to appreciate how close the resemblance is and how graceful and various the wavy and serpentine movements characteristic of this dance are.

It is quite natural and understandable that there are several similarities between this kind of dance-drama and the drama traditions of the neighbouring areas. If, however, we examine these different traditions, part by corresponding part, we shall find differences and distinctive peculiarities. Take the system of singing, or the style of dancing, or costumes, or the make-up techniques employed in each and make a comparative study, the individual character of each of these traditions stands out unmistakably. For instance in Yakshagana Bayalata there is dialogue but, the Kathakali, Ottanthullal and Ramanattam traditions employ gesture instead. Koochipudi is particularly full of these.

It may not be surprising to note that Koochipudi dance seems to have been conceived from inspiration drawn from Yakshagana dance of Kanara by its founder, Siddhendra Yogi (Siddappa), who, it is said took a 20-year course of study in Madhwa philosophy and other *shastras* at the feet of His Holiness, Sri Narahari Tirtha Swamiji, of Udupi Mutt, in South Kanara.

During his stay in this district, he also received training in *Natya Shastra*. Udupi being the centre of Yakshagana dance form, it may easily be surmised that the *yogi* received training in Yakshagana also and that the later Koochi-pudi style which came into vogue in Andhra, was introduced by him on the basis of his training in Yakshagana.

There is a type of drama called Yakshagana in Andhra Pradesh; at least there was such a thing once. It is reasonable to surmise that long, long ago they used to employ the Yakshagana style of music in the sedramas.

There is another kind of dance-drama known as Bhagavatha Mela which is now being played only in Melathoor and its immediate neighbourhood and which has an old tradition. The style of music adopted here is the modern Karnatak music and the dance is excessively influenced by Bharatanatyam.

There is no dance-drama tradition at all in neighbouring Maharashtra and so there is no question of a Maharashtrian influence on Yakshgana. Kathakali of Kerala is an off-shoot of the Ramanattam begun by the King of Kottarakara (who lived about 1655 A.D.). It is the result of a series of experiments with the Ramanattam system on the lines of Bharatanatyam. Any tyro can see that the dances here which can best be interpreted as speaking through gesture and movement, have had absolutely no influence on Yakshagana.

Kolluru Mukambika Temple, founded by Adi Shankaracharya, at the foot of the Kutachadri hills of Western Ghats in the northern part of South Kanara district has been traditionally a famous pilgrimage centre for the people of Kerala, who congregate in large numbers there during Navaratri. It is said that the pilgrims to this temple, which is a home of the Yakshagana folk dance-drama, took with them vivid impressions of this unique form of music and dance and the Raja of Kottarakara who heard these descriptions was influenced to found the Kathakali Natya in Kerala subsequently.

The painting of the face in Kathakali follows the famous classification of character into *Satwik*, *Rajasic* and *Taamasik* while in Yakshagana, it is different. It is, therefore, clear that Yakshagana is an art conceived and developed independently down the centuries by the people of the Kanara Districts on the West Coast of India.

Let us now consider the main features of Yakshagana. Firstly, it is a dance-drama combining dance and music. It must, therefore, have a story, a theme. The story is taken from the *Puranas* mainly dealing with the ten incarnations of Vishnu and that is why this is otherwise called *Dashavatara Aata*. The theme is the triumph of good over evil, of right

over wrong, of the gods over the demons. Each story is in the form of a minor epic containing about two or three hundred stanzas in the various metres mentioned earlier. These are set to music and sung by the *Bhagavatha* to the accompaniment of two percussion instruments called *chande* and *maddale*. The *maddale* is a variation of the *mridanga* but the *chande* or *chande vaadya* is peculiar to Yakshagana and is especially used in war-like scenes and scenes of terror. Each of such stories set to music is called a *prasanga* and there are today about 125 such *prasangas*.

Devidasa, Parthi Subba, Venkata, Nagappaya, Rama Bhatta and other folk writers have composed a number of well known *prasangas*, influenced as they were from poetical works of Kannada poets, Kumara Vyasa, Kumara Valmiki and others. All these writers belonged to the 17th century and after.

So far as the music is concerned, though a few *ragas* are at present in vogue, 80 known *ragas* have been identified by experts as having been used. The main feature of these is their emotional appeal. There are different *ragas* to express the emotions of anger, heroism, pity, horror, fear, etc. An 'angry' *raga* accompanied by the frenzied beating of the *chande* and the appropriate dance of the actor may resemble the challenging roar of a lion in a burst of fury and have a blood-curdling effect on the spectator. The minimum duration of a *prasanga* is about 3 to 4 hours.

Although these *ragas* bear the same names as those in Karnatak music, they are entirely different in the mode and style of singing. The derivation of the *raga* is so vastly different from that of Karnatak music that Yakshagana music is distinctly a separate system altogether.

*Desi raga lakshanas* have been touched by almost all musicologists. They opine that in *desi* the *panchamasvara* is a little inferior and that it is a *chaya* of the *marg ragas*. The *lakshanas* of Yakshagana is referred to in the Kannada *Chandra Prabha Purana* (11th Century). According to it *desi ragas* do not possess the refinement required to be sung to the accompaniment of the *veena* and other instruments. But this style has its own refinements. These *ragas* are known as *chaya ragas* according to some old scholars. These are 'Sayam Geya' in the view of Ahobila and "Saayanhe-giyate Iyam Shadavaa", says *Sangeetha Saramritakarata*. The distinct 9 features of Yakshagana music is that, though the *swara prasthara* may be the same as either Karnatak or Hindustani style of classical music, the *gamaka* and *alapana* style here is unique. We have to be proud that the *sudha* Yakshagana music remains evergreen only in the Kanara districts.

This system is transmitted by the *guru* to the disciple, who has to devote a lifetime of labour in order to master it. As already noted, the main feature of this system of music is its emotive power.

War-like emotions are derived by *ragas* *Ghantarava*, *Bhairavi*, *Kambodi* etc. The *ragas*, *Nilambari*, *Anandabhairavi*, *Todi*, *Saveri*, *Regupti*, *Punnaga Thodi*, *Mohana Kalyani*, etc. depict the emotion of sorrow. *Madhyamavathi*, *Todi*, *Arabi*, *Sri*, *Shankarabharana*, etc. depict pity. *Nadanamakriya*, *Mukhari*, etc. excel in the depiction of the terrible and the bizarre, and other *ragas* like *Mechu*, *Kore* and *Davalara* also are in vogue. During the course of the entire performance of the one-night session, the *sruti* will have to be altered at least 8 to 10 times.

The second feature of the Yakshagana dance-drama is that there is no premeditated prose dialogue. It is improvised by the actors and is based on the musical stanza sung by the *Bhagavatha*. While the *Bhagavatha* sings a stanza, the actors dance and when he stops singing they interpret the stanza in the form of a dialogue or a monologue as the case may be. Thus each stanza of the *prasaga* is elaborated and expounded by extempore dialogue. It may also be noted in passing that all female roles are played by male actors.

Thirdly, the dance form of the Yakshagana is peculiar to this art. It is more primeval than refined. Like the *ragas*, it highlights primitive human passions and emotions, especially fury and terror. These two emotions are more constantly evoked as the stories deal mostly with battles and scenes of violence and carnage. There is various foot work and movements which appropriately express these emotions. The actors dance to the music sung by the *Bhagavatha* and to the resounding beat of the *chande*. In Bharata Natya terms, the dance form can be said to be more of the *tandava* variety, although there are *lasya* movements also.

Bharata's *Natyashastra* has in itself the various special features of the different dance traditions of this great country, in more or less a codified form. The 108 *karanas*, the 33 *pindi bandhas*, 32 varieties of *charis*, *niraalamba charis*, six *sthanas*, the *prayoga nyayas-Bharatha saathwa*, *vaarshajanya* and *kaishiki*, while using the weapons, the *atikranta*, *vichitra*, *lalitha-shankara*, *suchividhda*, *dandapada*, *vihritha*, *alaatha* and other *mandalas* expounded in jumps, the face-to-face battle movements and other *gati pracharas* are also identified in Yakshagana by Bharata Natya experts. These features are still preserved in the various Yakshagana troupes here even to this day. Instances like, Gaya on his *gagana sanchara*, Kaurava entering the *dwaipayana sarovara*, Arjuna starting out on the chariot for his *vijaya yatra* in *Ashwamedha Parva*, Kaurava on his *ghoshayaatra* and game-hunting expedition, Sita-Rama-Lakshmana fording the river, Arjuna climbing the Indrakeela mountain, Babhruvahana getting down

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*Illustrations: P. 43. Krishna in "Krisharjuna Kaalaga". P. 44. Entrance of heroes Dharanraja, Bhima and Arjuna from "Voddolaga".*









into the *Patalaloka*, lust ridden Keechaka entering his sister's *vanithavihara*, the last day's *ratharohana* scene of Karna, who at the same time is grief-stricken at the loss of his son and roused with the revengeful spirit against Partha, depicting the contrary feelings of *veera* and *roudra* and such other scenes which are exhibited in different footwork by the Yakshagana artistes. This will apply also to the *trivida rechakas*. The Yakshagana artistes, it may be noted, did not become adept in the art by a thorough study of the *Shashtra* from books but learnt the art by hereditary talent and also by keen observation and practice.

The theme for the *prasangas* having been drawn from *Purana* stories, in Yakshgana there is a special feature known as *voddolaga*, which presents the important characters to the audience. There are *voddolagas* both for *nayakas* (heroes) like Rama, Dharmaraja and also for *prathinayakas* (villains) like Kaurava, Ravana and other *rakshasas*. The classical *mudras* and footwork displayed by the important characters during this *voddolaga* scene and partially hidden behind a curtain is something significant. *Shivabhaktas* like Hiranyakasipu, Ravana etc. very effectively display in tune with the *tala*, the various daily ablutions and *pujas* offered to *sivalinga*. *Hastamudrika* plays a significant role in this type of *abhinaya*. *Shikhara mudra* to denote heroism and authority. *Mrigashirsha* and *kataka mudra* to denote *Danta Dhavana*; *pallava mudra* for *Bhasmadharana*; *pataka mudra* for looking at the mirror; *mushti mudra* for displaying strength, *kartari mukhamudra* to denote assurance of protection, are among the six important *mudras* that could be noticed in the *voddolaga* scene. The various characters push aside the curtain and enter the *rangasthala* (stage) with footwork of the mixed type of *tandava* and *tandava-lasya* depending on the character of the hero or villain whom the actor wishes to portray and also to depict the essence of the story. A very special feature of the *voddolaga* dance is the *bidithige* (*chande* beats), which is different for each character who makes his entry into the *rangasthala*. This feature of *bidithige* helps a spectator to identify the character in *voddolaga*, even from a long distance just by hearing the beats. An experienced artist of Yakshagana who might be an adept in the various techniques of the dance-form, learnt by either hereditary instinct or by observation, many a times, may not be aware of the names or the characteristic intricacies of the various *mudras*, steps or footwork. They are ignorant of the *laksanas* or its history.

A very important feature of Yakshagana, however, is the costume and *aaharya abhinaya* — make-up of the actors. It is at once beautiful, colourful, bizarre, as also frightening. The art of facial make-up or *mukha varnik*, as this art is called, has a long tradition. Different charac-

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Illustrations: P. 45. *Karna and Shalya* from "Karnarjuna Kaalaga". P. 46. *Left: The hero-king. Right: The demon-king.*

ters have a different facial make-up. The most terrifying to behold is that of the *rakshasa* character. The effect of fear and horror instilled in the observer is to be appreciated only by seeing it. Words cannot adequately express the effect of make-up of such characters. Headgear and dress also play a distinct role in the make-up. There are different types of head-gears for different characters, such as the hero, a king, a prince, a minister, a *rakshasa*, a *kiratha*, a *gandharva*, etc. The *kore*, turbans of *kiratha-Gandharva*'s red turban, the impressive *varnike* of Rakshasa, Karna's black turban, the *kedige mundale* (small turbans) of characters like Arjuna, Babhruvahana, Sudhanwa which are prepared afresh on each occasion, beautiful crowns (*mukuta*) of Hamsadhwaja, Kalamlabhoopa, and such other head-gears have resulted in a valuable contribution of Karnataka—like Chalukya and Hoysala *shilpa*—to Indian art and cultural traditions. Dr. V. Raghavan, a great authority on Indology has to say: "Yakshagana make-up is decidedly more graceful, richer and more closely related to the ornamentation found in our sculpture than the Kathakali make-up."

A unique feature of the items used in the make-up is that they are made from purely indigenous materials—light wood, paddy stalk, areca nut bark, bamboos, waste jute and cotton, etc. There are different kinds of *bhujakirti*, arm bands, *kataka*, waist-bands, *virakaccha* etc. In fact, the make-up is so devised that characters like Lord Krishna, Arjuna, Babhruvahana, Ravana, etc. can be distinctly identified by their make-up.

Dress is generally of deep colours with patterns consisting of squares with alternating colours. The most essential feature of the costume and ornaments is the colour and glitter. The mere sight of it is thrilling to the spectator who is transported to the glittering *puranic* world of gods and *heroes* and *rakshasas*. The Gudigars, a class of craftsmen of South Kanara and Shimoga districts of Mysore State, have excelled in this art.

The total effect produced by the rousing music of the *Bhagavatha*, the rattling beats of the *chande*, the frenzied dance of the actors and their brilliant costume and colourful make-up combine to transport the spectator in a rising crescendo of music and dance to the din of ancient battlefields and deeds of valour.

As the name itself suggests, Yakshagana Bayalata (*bayalu* - field; *aata* - play), is a play staged in open fields of paddy after the monsoon and the harvest has been carted home. The stage — *rangasthala* as it is popularly known — is a square ground with a bamboo pole stuck in each corner to mark off the outer edge; its only decoration being bunches of fresh mango leaves, green and tender, festooned from pole to pole. About 30 to 40 feet from this is the green room, *chowki*, in popular language. Here, in the blaze of torches, now fast being replaced by petromax lights — the characters do the make-up. It is a peculiar characteristic of Yaksha-

gana Bayalata that each actor acts as his own make-up man and serves to impart an individualistic stamp to the traditional pattern of design. The torches and the brown soil and the deep green vegetation around, canopied over by the dark blue sky, provide a most enchanting backdrop for the play.

The play is preceded by a few traditional dances to keep the audience engaged as well as to allow enough time for make-up. In fact, the Yakshagana Bayalata is the only traditional dance-drama which is still observing almost all the details given for *poorvaranga abhinaya* by Bharata in his *Natyashastra*. Here it is called *sabhalakshana*. The first of these dances is the dance of the *kodangis*, or trainees, and begins after sunset. This is followed by a prayer to Lord Ganesha. After *puja* in the *chowki*, the man who plays the Jester in the drama (*Vidushaka*) carries the image of the deity of the *rangasthala* accompanied by the *Bhagavatha* and drummers and offers it ceremonial *arati*. The argument of the drama to be enacted is given at this moment through recitation of one or two brief songs. The stage is then engaged by two small boys made up as cowherds (*Bala Gopalaka*), and they dance for a while, and when they make their exit two female characters come on the stage and do some fine *lasya* dance.

After these preliminary dances, the *voddologa* begins. Most of the important characters make their appearance in this scene, but they stand with their backs to the audience and dance behind a curtain which only half reveals them. Female characters do not show themselves in this scene. After the *Nayaka* who gives the *voddologa* finishes his dance along with his retinue and is seated on an improvised dais, the *Bhagavatha* very respectfully elicits a self-introduction of each character as also the background of the story by putting questions.

The stellar role in Yakshagana is known as *Eradane vesha* (second role), because traditionally, the *Bhagavatha* plays the first role. Besides this, generally there are five other roles. *Purusha vesha* (hero), *Sthree vesha* (female role, heroine), *Rakshasa vesha* (demons), *Hasya* (jester) and *Moorane vesha* (third or minor roles). All these roles require intense training in dance and diction and background knowledge of the *Puranas*. The training is mostly by observation and by an expert in the art passing it on to someone in the family.

The most important person in the play is the *Bhagavatha*. It is he who runs the whole show. He controls, guides and directs every little thing. He is the *Sutradhara* without whose approval nothing can happen. It is he who sings the songs of the *prasanga* and it is on his rendering of them and on his appreciation of the subtleties and conflicts in the play that the success of the show depends. Every character makes obeisance to him on entrance.

The play ends shortly before sunrise, with the rise of the morning star in the distant horizon. The *Bhagavatha* sings the final benediction, *mangala*, offers *aarti* to the gods and returns to the *chowki* for prayer and thanksgiving to Lord Ganesha.

Every Yakshagana troupe is generally sponsored or patronised by a temple. Sometimes, to propitiate the deity for begetting a child, in time of trials and stress, devotees offer to organise a dance-drama by the troupe of the temple. A show is organised sometimes by public subscription also. Usually, however, some rich man in the village invites the troupe to perform for the public on his account.

We have quite a large number of these troupes, or *melas*, performing at different places in the two Kanara districts. Only the following, however, have taken pains to keep alive the beauty and grandeur of the traditional style; Mandarathi, Amritheswari, Maranakatte, Kolloor, Perdoor, Kateel and Dharmastala *melas* of South Kanara district and Idagunji, Karkee, Ankole, Kondada Kuli and Gundibail *melas* of North Kanara District.

Those troupes which are mostly maintained by the several temples in the two Kanara Districts are today finding it a strain to maintain the tradition. On an average an artiste in a troupe is paid about Rs. 1,500 for the six months he is engaged by the contractor of the *mela* (troupe). This is hardly sufficient for him to maintain himself and a family. The owner-temple can make up the losses. But the temples are prevented from spending more on this account by the Mysore Government's Religious Endowment Act. So the artistes are either giving up this profession or turning to troupes who perform solely with an eye to popular appeal.

It is a pity that such a noble art as Yakshagana which, if performed in the traditional way, should give pleasure to and uplift a vast mass of our people, should have come to such a sorry pass. Unless we give some thought to this matter and think of ways to keep the art alive, on the lines of the Kerala Kala Mandalam of Mahakavi Vallathol, we will lose this precious treasure. Kathakali is vigorous and widespread today mainly due to the efforts of Sri Vallathol.

One of the greatest Kannada writers of this century, Dr. K. Shivarama Karanth, has done, during the last three decades a tremendous amount of work in field of research about Yakshagana and also its revival in its pristine purity. His monumental work on this folk art has received world acclaim. Though he received some help from art lovers in his efforts to sponsor this art in its traditional glory to suit the modern audience, he could but touch the fringe of the problem. He set up a training centre for Yakshagana artistes at Brahmavar with the help of those who are interested in the tradi-

tional way. Yet without adequate help such work would be fruitless. The Government or Akademi should help the trainees with attractive stipends in a central training centre. Yakshagana could also be introduced as a subject in schools like music, Bharata Natya etc. Research should be conducted to collect more material about this traditional art — about its origin, history and great past artistes and composers of Yakshagana *prasangas*. These *prasangas* should be published and preserved for posterity. A Yakshagana Lakshana Granth may be compiled and published. And above all, the still surviving traditional artistes should be encouraged to foster and train young men with subvention for their shows. This is the only way that a future team of artistes could still be found for Yakshagana or else the glamour of the modernisers will kill this traditional art. Fortunately an intelligent public still looks down upon the cheap modernised shows. But this state of affairs will not last for ever.

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*K. S. Upadhyaya. Born in 1927 and educated at Coondapur, Shri Upadhyaya was attracted to the freedom movement in 1942. After completing his Intermediate in Science at the Mangalore Government College, he started a small printing press and a monthly in Kannada devoted to art and culture in 1953. He was also associated with several local Weeklies and contributed political and cultural articles. He is the Correspondent of 'Prajavani', the premier Kannada Daily of Bangalore. He has been associated for over 20 years in promoting art and cultural activities in South Kanara and Mysore State and was responsible for organising the first Yakshagana Troup to visit New Delhi in 1958 for Republic Day. He has been associated with Inter-State Cultural Troupes Exchange programmes and led the Mysore State Folk Dance Troupe to the Delhi Republic Day Folk Dance Festival in 1968.*